

**This is an edited version of a Tribute I gave to Helen Suzman  
at the Rabbi Cyrel Harris Community Centre on 10<sup>th</sup> May  
2006**

In the close to 13 years I was in the Old Parliament (1974 – 1986), six of them next Helen Suzman on the front bench, I tried to develop an understanding of what she had been through and what she had tried to do. She certainly did not believe that she single handedly could change the world, or that everything was inevitable and nothing could be done. She passionately believed that individuals either singularly, or collectively, can and must respond to attacks on their liberty. In particular she vehemently disagreed with any person or party claiming the right to infringe on the liberty of others in pursuit of some exclusive goal or policy.

During her stay in Parliament she came through a very mean time in the history of our country. She witnessed the implementation of the basic racist Acts of Apartheid; the internal revolt against them and resulting repression of the revolt. This took the form of massive arrests, State sponsored torture, capital punishment and straight forward murder of South African Citizens.

Helen would be the first to acknowledge that Parliament was not the only vantage point or necessarily the best one from which to oppose Apartheid. There were many extra-Parliamentary organizations who fought with great courage against it. But there were a few strategic advantages opposing from within Parliament. Every Act that was opposed is recorded in HANSARD. Historians will have a field day reading the ridiculous ideological justifications for Apartheid, but also Helen's exposure and opposition to them. Through Parliamentary privilege Helen had complete freedom of access to the Diplomatic Community and international organizations. I have no doubt that this also added to the increasing international pressure on the Apartheid regime. She also used her position in Parliament to visit prisoners on Robben Island and other prisons on the mainland to observe first hand, the conditions in them, and she was not backward in coming forward in talking about her experiences.

I wish to make a very self evident point. Helen Suzman did not have to do what she did; she did not do so out of some historical compulsion, nor because she thought she could change the world. She did so out of the choice available to her and because of a deep sense of moral outrage that racist policies were implemented to protect her and other classified Whites at the expense of the majority of citizens in the country.

I know this is a controversial take on Helen's career in public life. Most of the Nats in power hated her and always said she used Parliamentary privilege to grandstand and promote herself. Today some of the ANC in power tend to say the same thing. I did then, and do now, treat such attitudes with the utmost contempt.

South Africa is no longer going through a mean time. The present is infinitely preferable to the past. But we are going through a worrying time as far as the consolidation of our democracy is concerned. Official spokespersons acknowledge widespread corruption, fraud, theft and neglect of official duties at all three levels of government. It is not unreasonable to ask where are the public figures who enjoy the privileges of Parliament and public office who are prepared to put their bodies on the line to combat and expose these practices?

Helen Suzman was there at a much different time and she spoke up fearlessly and repeatedly. For that I and many others, will always honour her.

VAN ZYL SLABBERT  
May 2006